

The church at Sardis \* Revelation 3:1-7

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Out of all the letters in the book of Revelation, this one is by far the scariest to me as pastor. It's scary to me because it raises the possibility that you can be an active church with a good reputation but in fact be dead in God's eyes. That's a scary thought. That's a church that I don't want us to be.

And I don't think we're that church. I think our reputation and our reality line up but in my preparation for this morning, I did write in my journal: 'we need to consider the possibility that this letter describes us and if it does, ask 'what can we do about it?' And if it doesn't, ask 'How do we keep it that way?'

I think a part of that is honestly asking the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see our blind spots, so let's pray as we begin this morning.

*Holy Spirit, as we read these words that You inspired, that You breathed out, that come from the very heart of God, I pray that You would help us to be honest listeners. Help us to be open to the possibility that these words are about us. If they are, help us to change, show us how, motivate us to do it. And if they're not, help us to keep on serving You with our whole hearts because we desire to honour You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Let's go to our passage for today - Revelation 3, starting in verse 1 and we'll look at Jesus' letter to the church at Sardis. As you're going there, let me tell you a little bit about Sardis.

Sardis was located about fifty kilometers southeast of Thyatira and a little over eighty kilometers due east of Smyrna. Sardis was a pretty average Turkish town when Jesus wrote to it but boy did it have rich and fabled history.

You've heard of King Midas and the golden touch? Everything he touched turned to gold? As the story goes, he came to Sardis and washed in the nearby river and the 'turning things to gold' power washed off into the river. There are ancient reports that there was gold in the river and there must have been gold somewhere nearby because in time Sardis became a very wealthy city. Sardis was also at one time the capital city to a famous ancient king named Croesus who ruled over much of the land that the churches of Revelation are in.

Sardis had a rich history, but nothing much had happened there lately. It was a comfortable, wealthy city, but it was more famous for what it had done in the past than what it was doing now.

There was a church at Sardis too – remember, we're not talking about a building – we're talking about a group of people following Jesus. There was a church in Sardis and through John, Jesus chose to write to that church. Here's what He said. Verse 1:

<sup>1</sup>"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

This is a callback to chapter 1. If you think back to that chapter, Jesus revealed Himself to John in all His wondrous, otherworldly glory and here He introduces Himself He did at the beginning: He is the One who holds the seven spirits of God (your Bible might say 'sevenfold') and the seven stars in His right hand (Rev. 1:16).

Now chapter one tells us that the stars represent the churches and so that means that Jesus is introducing Himself as the One who holds the churches, Sardis included, in one hand and the Holy Spirit, in all His manifest fullness, in the other. (The Ancient Near Eastern mind loves seven – it's a symbol of completeness).

So Jesus holds the Spirit and the churches in His hand and to the church at Sardis He says:

"I know your deeds..."

Now if you remember from last week, Jesus said the very same thing to the church in Thyatira: "I know your deeds, your works of love and faith and service and perseverance." Jesus knew what they've been up to and they had been up to good things.

The letter to Sardis starts the very same way – "I know your deeds." But then what does it say?

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

Jesus only needs three words to cut through the noise at Sardis – people think you're alive, you seem to be a vibrant church – but you are dead. Those are three words that no church wants to hear.

Now let's pause and put our thinking caps on here for a minute because it's not entirely clear to me what has caused this situation. You have a church that's known for being alive – so there must be some kind of religious or community service going on – but in Jesus' mind, it's all for nothing. *That's scary* – the thought that you could be doing things that gain you a good reputation as a church in the world's eyes, but not in God's.

So I sat in my office and thought 'What's going on here? What combination of circumstances could have led to this particular situation?' And I came up with a few possibilities and I'll share them with you because I think that this is what we need to do when we read Scripture – dig into it, think about it, see what it meant *then* so we can live in light of it *now*.

So, how do you get a reputation for being alive when in reality your church is dead? I'll give you five possibilities:

1. They're only doing worldly deeds. They're having spaghetti suppers and strawberry socials and car washes and food drives but they're not doing much to advance the Kingdom. They're really playing down their commitment to Jesus and really being nothing more than a community service organization like the United Way. There's nothing wrong with spaghetti suppers and strawberry socials – but if that's all your church is doing, with no effort to tie them into the Gospel, then that makes a dead church in Jesus' eyes. Maybe the problem is that they're majoring worldly deeds.
2. It's also possible that they're doing good things but that those things are compromised by sin. Right? Maybe outwardly there are great things happening, people are coming to faith, the community is being served, and yet half the church is going to guild feasts or cheating on their spouses or cheating on their taxes. The leaders proclaim the Gospel from the pulpit but abuse their power in the back room. Maybe they're doing good things, but they are compromised by sin.
3. I wonder too if maybe the church at Sardis had good intentions but never got around to doing anything. They start good things but never finish them. In the next verse, Jesus says 'I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of God.' Maybe they start well but never finish.
4. Maybe they're doing good deeds apart from God. They're proclaiming the Gospel, the feeding the needy but they're not asking what God would have them do. They're not intentionally doing His will His way with His power. Remember, Jesus says 'I am the vine, you are the branches – abide in Me and you will bear much fruit' (John 15:5); these people aren't taking the time to listen to and follow the Spirit and so while they're doing good things, it's not in the power of God. That could be the problem here.
5. Maybe the problem is that they're just kind of coasting on their laurels. Their reputation is for what the church used to be, a generation back, but now they're not really different from the world around them. In that way, they would be like Sardis itself; renowned for its past, inactive in the present.

There may be something to each of those possibilities and certainly I know that there are churches in the world today that fit into each of those categories, but I suspect we can narrow it down for Sardis by looking at what comes next.

Because in quick succession in the next two verses, Jesus rattles off five commands to reverse the way things are going; I think if we see hear what the solution is, that can help us to understand the problem.

So here it is – verse 2 -

<sup>2</sup> “Wake up! (Pay attention!)” Whenever this word appears in the Bible, it has this dual meaning of ‘wake up’ like as in sleep and ‘be alert, be on guard.’ (Sing the alive awake alert enthusiastic song?)

“Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.” That sounds to me like there was once real life in this church but it’s been suffocated by complacency, by compromise, by the world. They’ve loosened their grip on Jesus’ name and so their faith has withered on the vine. In fact, it’s about to die and so those good works that God prepared for us to do are not getting done.

Wake up! Strengthen what remains!

<sup>3</sup> Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard;”

Now John Stott makes a really compelling argument that Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit here. He says “They had received the Holy Spirit. He is the distinctive gift that we all receive when we respond to the gospel with repentance and faith.”<sup>i</sup> And I think he’s right. After all, think back to the beginning; Jesus is the One who holds the sevenfold Spirit in His hand; why? So He can send Him out to help His followers. So on one level, I think Jesus IS talking about the Holy Spirit, but I think there’s something else going on here.

Because whenever you hear that ‘what you have received’ phrase in the Bible, it means the author is talking about the apostolic tradition, the central teachings of the faith, the good news about Jesus. 1 Corinthians 15:1 for example: “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand” (1Co 15:1 NIV).

It sounds to me like the Christians in Sardis received the Gospel with faith and started to put it into practice in their lives, but then just kind of lost interest. There’s other things to do. There’s memes to scroll through and so they just haven’t made the Bible and their faith a priority. And so Jesus says – ‘Remember that! Remember the Gospel that gave you life! Remember the Redeemer who died to save you!’ And don’t just remember that – act on it!

“Obey it,” (keep it! Is another way you can translate it. Live in light of it!).

Wake up, strengthen what remains, remember the Gospel and live in light of it and finally “repent!” (Stop doing what you’re doing and living like you’re living and turn around and come back to me).

This is Jesus’ prescription for the church at Sardis: Wake up! Strengthen what remains! Don’t let it die! Remember what you received! Obey it! Stop what you’re doing and come back to me!

Given those commands, and given Sardis' history as a whole, I suspect that this is a church that's living in the past. The generation before them did great things, but now they've just kinda let it slide. They've grown comfortable. They've grown complacent. They haven't stretched their faith or really invested in it themselves and so they've just coasted on their laurels and fallen asleep.<sup>ii</sup> So Jesus says 'Wake up! Strengthen what remains. Blow those embers back into flame. Remember what you've received! Keep it and come back to Me!'

Because if you don't – the rest of verse 3 -

But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief [and a thief never brings good things], and you will not know at what time I will come to you. (Or a better translation – I will come against you).

Jesus is serious about this. It does no good for a church to rest on its laurels or get stuck going through the motions of a religious routine rather than having an active faith.<sup>iii</sup> Jesus essentially says 'I came once to lay down My life for you; I don't want to come again to be against you.'

And yet, Jesus says, there is hope.

<sup>4</sup> Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

So that means that there are some people in Sardis who *are* actively walking with God. They're actively putting their faith into practice, they're taking responsibility for their own spiritual growth, they're living in light of the fact that Jesus has saved them and as a result, they have brilliant white, unstained victory robes – and God says 'They are worthy.' And then He continues, verse 5:

<sup>5</sup> He who overcomes [remember, in John's mind, to overcome is to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and act in light of it] will, like them, be dressed in white.

Listen really closely to that. "He who overcomes, will, like them, be dressed in white."

Jesus is describing two sets of people here. First the people 'who have not grass-stained their God-given holiness' and second, the people who have – ie., the church at large whose faith is at risk of blinking out of existence.

This is one of the most severe, critical letters in the book of Revelation but I also think it's one of the most pastoral. Because Jesus says 'it's not too late. It's never too late. There's always hope.' It's like that scene in Princess Bride – Billy Crystal and Carole Kane – Miracle Max? "He's not dead, he's only mostly dead. And mostly dead is partly alive.'

The church at Sardis is only mostly dead – it is partly alive. And so Jesus says: ‘Strengthen what remains!’ Partner with the Holy Spirit to exercise your faith and you will walk with me in white.

And Jesus sweetens the deal with an incredible promise. Verse 5, He says ‘if anyone will partner with Me in strengthening their faith, “I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”

Jesus is harsh in this letter because He wants to be generous with us in the end. He wants to be able to stand beside you on Judgment Day and say ‘Graham Gladstone walked with me. So and so walked with me.’ He doesn’t want to blot out name out on that list; He died to put us there! And so He says, verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Rev 3:1-6 NIV).

The letter to Sardis; a revelation to our church.

So what do you think? Are we like Sardis?

Are we living in the past? Longing for the good old days? Are we doing things apart from the power of God? Are we doing good things without advancing the Kingdom?

I don’t think so. But I will say this, as a rule of thumb: Authentic faith is active faith. Authentic faith is active faith.

The people in Sardis probably thought that they were faith-filled people. After all, they meeting on Sundays and doing enough good deeds to have a good reputation. But what they actually had was not authentic faith because they weren’t really doing anything about it. They were just going through the motions.

The church at Sardis, many churches over the years have faltered because they’ve stopped exercising active faith. They’ve grown complacent. They’ve fallen into religious routine and they aren’t intentionally putting their faith into action in tangible ways. Authentic faith is active faith!

And I think that Jesus’ commands to the church at Sardis can help us to stay active too.

Wake up! Stay alert! Especially in a situation where it’s relatively easy to be a Christian. If we’re not facing active opposition that constantly forces us to stand up for our faith, we can just blend into the world around us; comfort and security can lull us into complacency. Jesus says to us as individuals and as a church: ‘Pay attention! Wake up!’

Jesus says to us ‘Strengthen what you have.’ You’re here. That means you have faith. Strengthen it. Invest in it. Cultivate it. Take responsibility for your growth as a follower of Jesus. How?

Jesus says ‘Remember what you have received and heard and obey it!’ This is why I put so much emphasis on reading the Bible for yourself. We have received the Bible from the Lord. We have received the Holy Spirit to help us to read it and apply it. It will do no good sitting on your shelf, but if you get it into your heart by consistently reading it and thinking about it, it becomes the fuel that will power your faith to be active in the world.

Wake up! Strengthen what you have! Remember what you’ve received and obey it! Repent and abide in Me! Jesus says because when we abide in Him we bear much fruit (John 15:8).

Put your faith into action because authentic faith is active faith.

Ok, let me talk really honestly here. Our church is the kind of church where it would be really easy to be like Sardis. We have a rich and vibrant history here. We have so many families who have invested in our church and done really important things and we need to celebrate them and remember their faithfulness.

But we can’t live in the past. Every generation of Christians has to figure out ‘how are we going to faithfully express the truths of our faith in ways that people will understand’ and ‘how do we faithfully put our faith into action in the world that we live in’ and ‘how can we set up the next generation to succeed in their faith?’ These are questions that I’m constantly asking myself. I’m constantly trying to find the balance between the music and language and needs of the diverse group of people who are here now and the people who we want to be here tomorrow, in five years, in twenty years.

And I feel supported in that. I’ve had conversations with some of you who’ve said ‘I kind of wish things were more like they were when I was younger but I understand why you’re making these changes’ – I’ll take it. I’ve known from the very beginning that you’ve been eager to support your young people and we are taking steps to do that. I am quite optimistic that we are not a Sardis church but instead a church that’s putting faith into action.

So keep it up. Authentic faith is active faith.

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<sup>i</sup> John Stott, *What Christ thinks of the Church*, 69.

<sup>ii</sup> That command to ‘stay alert’ would have really resonated with the people of Sardis in particular; twice in their history they were overtaken because they thought their city was safe. They didn’t guard all the ways in and twice! Cyrus of Persia, Antiochus the Great, came in and conquered their city because they weren’t paying attention. No enemy ever took Sardis in a head on attack, but twice they fell because they weren’t paying attention.

<sup>iii</sup> “The issues are too serious for us to play the hypocrite. The needs of the world are so great that we cannot afford to dabble in religion or trifle with God” (Stott, 72-73).